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HOW TO... Improve Alt-Tab with Task Switch

Emma Marshall uncovers a handy utility for Windows XP that can improve your ability to switch between applications quickly

If you frequently work on multiple applications at once, you'll probably already know that the fastest way to move between them is to use the keyboard short cut Alt-Tab. This opens a window onscreen showing icons for each program that is open on your computer. By keeping the Alt key pressed down and repeatedly pressing the Tab key, you can quickly move through the different icons. Windows will switch focus to the program that is selected when you release the Alt key.

The developers at Microsoft have come up with a little utility for Windows XP that makes this Alt-Tab screen even more useful. If you use Task Switch, you still use the Alt and Tab keys to move between open windows, but you also get a little preview of the open window when it is selected.

Task Switch is one of the PowerToys. These are little programs that Microsoft developers continue to create once an operating system has been released. However, bear in mind that these utilities aren't covered by the support for your operating system.

1 Start your web browser and then go to www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/powertoys/xppowertoys.msp. On the right-hand side of the page, under Download, is a list of the PowerToys you can download. Scroll down the list until you get to Alt-Tab Replacement. Click on the link called

Taskswitch.exe. Click on Save in the File Download dialog box that appears. Save the file somewhere you'll find it easily, such as on the desktop.

2 Once the file has downloaded, locate its icon and then double-click on it. Click on Run and then follow the onscreen instructions to install the program. You can also use this program file to uninstall or change the program at a later date. Just double-click on the icon again and this time select Delete or Modify when prompted.

3 Once Task Switch is installed, you can try it out. Press the Alt key and then, while keeping that key held down, tap on the Tab key. The Alt-Tab replacement window will now look quite different. Its interface is more in keeping with the general look and feel of Windows XP. However, the really cool bit is that, when you select an icon, a preview of it will appear on the left-hand side.

4 There is one small limitation with Task Switch, however. When using it, if you select a window that has been minimised on to the taskbar, you won't see a preview of the contents of that window. Instead, what you will see in the Preview is an image of that window's button on the taskbar, as can be seen in the screen below.

